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PP RUEHDE RUEHDH RUEHDIR
DE RUEHKU #1012/01 2951311
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 221311Z OCT 09
FM AMEMBASSY KUWAIT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4089
INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 001012

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NEA/ARP

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/13/2019
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SUBJECT: UNIVERSITY ELECTIONS: THE FUTURE OF
TRIBAL-ISLAMIST DOMINANCE IN KUWAIT?

Classified By: PolCouns Pete O'Donohue for reasons 1.4 b and d

1.(U) Summary. On October 11, the Islamist Al-Itilafiyah (Arabic for "Coalition") party won the 2009 Kuwait University student union election -- as it has for the past thirty-one years straight -- trouncing the liberal and independent parties and securing all seats on the 19-member student governing board. Al-Italifiyah,s lop-sided victory reflects a winner-take-all system; it is worth noting that more than fifty percent of the vote went to other groups, including secular parties. This Kuwait University contest also provides a hint of how parliamentary elections might look if the GOK merged Kuwait's five electoral districts into a single district, a possibility "approved in principle" by a parliamentary committee on October 19 (although the GOK is highly unlikely to approve such a redistricting anytime soon). End summary.

KU's October 11 Election

2.(U) In the October 11 winner-take-all election for Kuwait University's 19-member student governing board, the Itilafiyah slate won with 6,050 votes, handily defeating the independent Al-Mostaqilla party (4,017), the liberal Al-Wasat Al-Demoqrati party (1,680), and the Shi'a Al-Islamiya party (fewer than 1,500 votes). A sixth party, the Salafist Islamic Union Group, ran in a coalition with Itilafiyah for the fourth year in a row. About 16,000 of Kuwait University's 23,000 students are female and women have been able to vote and run since the student union's inaugural 1969 election (thirty-six years before women got the right to vote in Kuwait's parliamentary elections). Slightly more than half of Kuwait University students are from conservative and tribalist outlying areas, former Itilafiyah president Aws Al-Shaheen told Poloff, October 11.

Impact of the men-only tribal primaries

3.(U) Despite the fact that roughly two-thirds of student voters are female, male candidates continue to win the majority of senior positions because the elections are dominated by tribes and all-male tribal primaries. These tribal candidates have a built-in voter base which they mobilize through the primaries (Note: Tribal primaries are illegal for Parliamentary elections, but not student polls. End Note.) and by using tribal voter registration lists to ensure promised votes are delivered, as witnessed by Poloff during an election-day tour with Shaheen. Itilafiyah's continued dominance of elections has helped maintain strict

gender segregation in Kuwait University's classrooms, libraries, and cafeterias (however, Poloff noticed that men and women mix freely in the halls and courtyard).

Itilafiyah and the Kuwaiti Muslim Brotherhood

4.(C) The extent of the current relationship between Itilafiyah and the Kuwaiti Muslim Brotherhood (ICM) is unclear. Shaheen would not comment except to say that they shared many -- but not all -- political views, pointing out that Itilafiyah supported women's suffrage for many years while the ICM was still opposed to it. Lawyer and women's rights activist Thikra Al-Rashidi, Shi'a MP Saleh Ashour, and liberal talkshow host Yousef Al-Jassem separately told Poloff that ICM bankrolls Itilafiyah.

Comment

5.(U) While ICM-affiliated Itilafiyah is the BPOC (Big Party On Campus), having dominated the student union for thirty-one years, in the real political world ICM won only one of fifty seats in Kuwait's May 2009 parliamentary election -- a stinging defeat for the best-organized party in Kuwait. Keeping in mind that the university election is an imperfect

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mirror for the parliamentary contest, (for example, the university election is a winner-take-all, party-slate system), one reason Itilafiyah has done better on campus is that there it has co-opted tribals and salafists, who join because being part of the incumbent ruling party gives significant advantages, including priority access to university funding and first crack at impressionable freshmen that derives from control of the campus orientation program. In contrast, as ICM Secretary-General Dr. Nasser Al-Sane recently told DCM, in the May 2009 parliamentary elections, ICM became tarnished for running too slick and sophisticated a campaign (to include early bulk purchasing of media space at discounted rates) which generated a public back-lash that led ICM-sympathetic candidates to instead run outside the party as independent tribalists. Salafist candidates for parliament also had no need to seek common cause with the Ikhwan, being able to run on their own (often well-funded) platforms.

6.(U) Itilafiyah's repeated success may have two broader points of significance for Kuwaiti politics writ large. First, it demonstrates the continuing resonance of Islamist thought and support for gender segregation among many young Kuwaitis -- a conservative trend we judge to be on the upswing. The student union elections also suggest that if the GOK merged Kuwait's current five electoral districts into a single, large district (a possibility "approved in principle" by a parliamentary committee on October 19, but unlikely to be approved by the GOK anytime soon), this might not dilute the tribalist and Islamist current as many liberals here hope. On campus, identity (tribe) appears a more important organizing principle than ideology (which for Itilafiyah is in any case more icing than cake); that fact -- plus the failure of the Democratic and independent secularists on campus to join forces -- should give liberal proponents of the one-district concept pause. End comment.

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